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Are personality, well-being and death anxiety related to religious affiliation?

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A survey design was used to examine if there are any differences between a Christian, a Muslim, and a non-religious group in five personality factors (dominance, liveliness, warmth, apprehension, and sensitivity), general well-being, and death anxiety. No significant differences were found with any of the personality factors between the three groups. Religious participants (Christians and Muslims combined) scored significantly higher for general well-being than non-religious participants. Christians scored significantly lower for death anxiety than both non-religious and Muslim groups, and Muslims scored significantly higher than the non-religious group. These findings are discussed with reference to Terror Management Theory. Suggestions for future research include deeper investigation into beliefs of the afterlife and inclusion of more religions into psychological studies.

Keywords: death anxiety; personality; religious affiliation; well-being; Terror Management Theory

Introduction

Personality

Personality has been investigated in relation to many aspects of life, and one area that has received considerable attention is its relationship with religion. Freud argued that religious belief reflected a neurotic personality (1950), while Jung argued that belief in religion promotes mental stability (1938). Also, Eysenck (1954) theorized that religiosity is associated with introversion.

Francis (1993), using the EPQ scale with a Christian sample found no correlation between religiosity and neuroticism which supports neither Freud (1950) nor Jung's (1938) theories, and no relationship with extraversion, therefore, refuting Eysenck's theory. However, there was partial support for Eysenck when the "Big Five" inventory was used (Taylor & MacDonald, 1999). Furthermore, Francis (1993) found a moderately negative correlation between religiosity and psychoticism, and a similar effect has been found with a Muslim sample (Wilde & Joseph, 1997).

Research using the 16PF scale has found that active church members score higher than non-church members for sensitivity, warmth, apprehension, and anxiety but lower for dominance and liveliness, and are less radical (Barton & Vaughn, 1976). There seems to be

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a need for further investigation into personality and religion, particularly as most of the research includes only Christians.

Well-being

Argyle's (2000) claim that church members are happier than non-church members is supported by Ellison (1991), who found that religious participants reported greater life satisfaction and happiness, and were better equipped to deal with traumatic life events. Additionally, a positive correlation was found between frequency of prayer and well-being (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 1999). However, O'Connor, Cobb, and O'Connor (2003) found no association between religiosity and well-being revealing a need for further investigation into possible differences between faiths.

Death anxiety

It has been suggested that one function of religion is to help cope with anxiety about death. Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski' (1997) Terror Management Theory (TMT) states that humans have a very deep fear of death and have created "cultural world views" such as belief in the afterlife (BA) to control this anxiety. TMT has been supported by research which shows that subjects will score higher on a BA scale following exposure to a death threat condition (Osarchuk & Tatz, 1973).

Strong religious belief can be considered synonymous with BA, particularly in Christianity and Islam. However, although some studies have found strong religious conviction to be associated with lower death anxiety (Alvarado, Templer, Bresler, & Thomasdobson, 1995; Martin & Wrightsman, 1965) others have found no relationship between these two factors (Rose & O'Sullivan, 2002; Templer & Dotson, 1970).

However, Rose and O'Sullivan (2002) found a strong positive relationship between BA and a reward expectation of the afterlife (such as an eternal life in heaven), and a weak correlation between BA and the "judgement/punishment expectation" (the possibility of going to hell). This contradicts the view that BA is always comforting. Finally, when different religious groups were measured, Catholic Charismatics scored high for anxiety about death, Christian Scientists medium, and Baha'i low which suggests that different ideologies lead to varying degrees of death anxiety (Richman, 1980). The present study aims to develop Richman's findings and the validity of TMT by comparing Christian, Muslim, and non-religious groups for death anxiety.

Therefore, the overall aim of this study is to investigate further whether there are any differences in personality (five factors selected), general well-being, and death anxiety between a Christian, Muslim, and non-religious group.

Method

Design

A survey design was used. Three groups took part: Christians, Muslims, and a group of non-religious participants. The five aspects of personality measured were dominance, liveliness, sensitivity, apprehension, and warmth. General well-being and death anxiety were also measured.

Participants

There were 135 participants in this study, of which 39 were male, and 96 were female. The age range was 18–51, and the mean age was 21.4 years old. They were recruited from two psychology groups at the University of Huddersfield, and the University's Christian Union. Also, the "snowballing" method was used to gain access to people who were otherwise difficult to reach.

Materials

A questionnaire was the only material used. It began with a section that included general demographics, and also enquired about participants' religious affiliation and parent(s)/primary caregiver(s) religious affiliation.

The personality test is adapted from Cattell, Cattell, and Cattell's (1994) 16PF5 but uses five of these factors and seven questions for each factor—these were warmth, dominance, liveliness, sensitivity, and apprehension. Each participant was given a score out of 14 for each of the five factors.

The well-being section was adapted from the GHQ-12 (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) as seven of the 12 statements were used. The statements are followed by a Likert scale of 0–4; hence each participant was given a total score out of 28 (28 being the highest level of well-being and 0 the lowest).

In the last section the participants were asked to rate their death anxiety on a Likert scale between 0 (low) and 7 (high). They were then asked to explain why they felt at that level of anxiety.

Results

This study used 63 Christians, 18 Muslims, and 54 non-religious participants. On a scale of 0–10, the mean strength of religious belief was 7.85 for Christians and 7.2 for Muslims.

An alpha level of 5% was set for all statistical tests. The power of the test was assessed at 0.99 with an effect size of 0.2.

For the five personality factors, the mean scores appear to be very similar between the three groups. Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA produced no significant differences for the five factors between the Christian, Muslim, and non-religious groups.

The three groups were also measured for general well-being, and the mean scores were 19.9 for Christians, 18.28 for Muslims, and 15.81 for the non-religious group.

An ANOVA showed a significant difference between the Christian, Muslim, and non-religious group for general well-being ($F(2) = 8.95$, $p < 0.001$). A subsequent post hoc test (Scheffe) showed that the only significant difference was between the Christian and non-religious groups ($p < 0.001$), with the Christians scoring higher.

A t -test showed a significant difference for general well-being scores between those who considered themselves to be religious (Christians and Muslims combined) and those who did not. Religious participants scored a mean of 19.38 ($SD = 4.76$, $N = 84$), which was higher than non-religious participants whose mean was 15.81 ($SD = 5.87$, $N = 54$). This difference was found to be significant ($t = 3.74$, $df = 96.2$, $p < 0.001$ (one-tailed)).

A Pearson correlation (one-tailed) has shown a significant ($p < 0.001$) and moderately positive (0.42) correlation between strength of religious belief and well-being.

The final section of the survey measured death anxiety for the Christian, Muslim, and non-religious groups. The lowest possible score was 1, and the highest, 7. The Christian group scored 2.16, the non-religious group 2.94, and the Muslim group 4.5.

For death anxiety, an ANOVA found a significant difference between the three groups ($F(2) = 14.03$, $p < 0.001$). A post hoc test (Scheffe) has shown that Christians scored significantly lower than both Muslims ($p < 0.001$) and the non-religious group ($p = 0.04$), and Muslims scored significantly higher than the non-religious group ($p = 0.004$).

Discussion

Personality

The results have shown no significant difference in any of the five personality factors between the Christian, Muslim, and non-religious groups, and so the findings from Barton and Vaughn (1976) have not been supported. Furthermore, Eysenck's (1954) theory that religion is associated with introversion is not supported here, as there is no significant difference between the groups for dominance and liveliness.

Well-being

Religious participants (Christians and Muslims combined) scored significantly higher for general well-being than non-religious participants. This finding gives support to Ellison (1991) who found that participants with strong religious faith reported greater life satisfaction and happiness, as does the moderately positive correlation between religiosity and well-being. The significantly higher score for the Christian group over the non-religious group supports Maltby et al.'s (1999) findings that frequency of prayer is correlated positively with well-being. And though the difference was not significant, Muslims scored higher for well-being than the non-religious group, tentatively supporting the view that religion can be associated with greater well-being.

However, an interesting finding is the lack of support for O'Connor et al. (2003) whose participants were also undergraduate students and were administered the GHQ. They reported no association between GHQ scores and strength of religious belief among Christian participants. Further investigation may be required to understand the different findings between the two studies.

Death anxiety

A significant difference was found between the three groups for death anxiety which supports Richman's (1980) belief that different religious ideologies lead to varying degrees of death anxiety. Also supported are the findings of Alvarado et al. (1995) and Martin and Wrightsman (1965) who found that Christians with a strong religious conviction scored lower for death anxiety than non-religious participants.

As Osarchuk and Tatz (1973) found, belief in the afterlife is associated with lower death anxiety. However, the present study can only partially support their results, as although Christians scored low for death anxiety, Muslims scored highly in comparison. The present study also refutes the claim of Templer and Dotson (1970) who found no association between religiosity and death anxiety and concluded that religion must have a limited effect on students. The present study has shown a significant difference for its student participants between these two factors. One weakness of this research is the limited

age range of a student sample. A greater age range of participants including more older adults would possibly produce different results, particularly if death is considered more frequently with age.

The findings also give partial support to Greenberg et al.'s (1997) Terror Management Theory as Christians scored lower for death anxiety than the non-religious participants. However, as Muslims scored significantly higher than the non-religious, this refutes TMT. It appears as though for Muslims, belief in the afterlife does not serve to reduce anxiety about death.

It can be understood through the individual responses of the Christians in the questionnaire how TMT functions. Themes of heaven and eternal life are prevalent, whereas for Muslims the afterlife may be something to fear ("I don't know if I have been a good Muslim and so go to heaven or hell").

Lastly, the present study also finds some support for Rose and O'Sullivan (2002) who found a strong relationship between BA and a "reward expectation" of the afterlife, which appears to be supported by Christian responses such as "I am going to be with my saviour in heaven." Similarly, Rose and O'Sullivan also found a weak correlation between BA and the "judgement/punishment expectation" of the afterlife, and this can be explained by Muslim responses such as "Not prepared enough for day of judgement." Therefore, TMT must be adjusted to include the finding that a belief in the afterlife does not necessarily act as a coping strategy for all.

Further research suggestions

The main suggestions of this study are that future research should include more religions such as Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, atheists, agnostics, and examine denominational differences. More specifically, further investigation into death anxiety and the validity of Terror Management Theory among other religious groups is required.

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